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STIRRING STORIES OF NAVAL ACADEMY LIFE



CLIF FARADAY
IN COMMAND

OR
THE FIGHT OF
HIS LIFE.

BY
ENSIGN CLARKE FITCH, U.S.N.

Clif Faraday in Command;

OR,

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CHAPTER I.

THE HOODOO!

"Take care!"

"What now?"

"Speed up, Mistah Faraday—speed up!"

"Hold on!"

"I'se holdin' on—whoof! whillipens! Now dis mortal am undone!"

Clatter! rang out the sharp hoof strokes of one horse, whip-urged.

Klip—klop! sounded the echoing chorus of a second, spur-driven into sudden, violent pursuit.

"Halt! I tell you, Hannibal!"

"Nebber! Nebbersoever, no, indeed! De spell am on—oh, I'se got dem!"

"Got what?"

"De horned demons! De curse hab fallen—oh, I seed him!"

"Saw who?"

"*De Hoodoo!*"

Hannibal, dusky scion of one of the sable chefs de cuisine at the Annapolis Naval Academy, had spoken first—spoke last now.

Clif Faraday, king-plebe of the gallant cadet contingent, had tried to get a word in edgewise to understand the motive of a most alarming excitement betrayed abruptly by his attendant and companion.

Both were superbly mounted, approaching the end of a "through by twilight" dash from the institution in question.

Their destination was the banks of the Paturent river, where the Fourth Class, just landed from a practice ship cruise, was making camp.

Voices, a vague radiance as of a lantern, Clif had taken in through a screen of vines at the side of the dusk-haunted bridle path they were pursuing.

Hannibal, slightly in advance, had witnessed something more clearly, however, it was evident.

With a shocked cry of affright he had crouched low in the saddle, lifted his whip, slashed the horse into action with a spring.

The voices were promptly hushed, the light obliterated. Clif did not linger to investigate why.

Hannibal had bolted as if, indeed, "horned demons" were pursuing him.

Losing all control of himself and his steed, he had scared the latter into runaway frenzy.

"Stop, I tell you!" commanded Clif, urging up.

"Cawn't—now!" quavered Hannibal, a flying streak, whip and bridle dropped, both arms clasped about the animal's neck.

The naval cadet—a skilled horseman—gave his splendid steed a guiding spur—it gained to the flanks of its leader.

A second masterly admonition brought the two animals fairly abreast.

Ere Clif could reach out and seize the dangling bridle of the affrighted runaway, however, it veered, sprang aside with a snort, made a wheel and came to a halt abreast a thick wall of saplings, but riderless.

A circling human rocket, Hannibal had been torn loose from neck and mane.

A sort of whistling moan accompanied his parabola curve through the air.

Then with a very fair imitation of the exploding "plunk!" of a real rocket, he landed, set down in a nest of soft marsh mud as neatly as if aimed for it purposely.

"Whoof!" was knocked out of him in a frantic gasp.

Clif momentarily left him rubbing his kinky wool in a dazed, uncertain way.

The cadet caught the bridle of the loose horse, quieted it, tied both to a tree, hurried over to the victim of the wild woodland dash.

"Now then!" he spoke rather sharply, "what is this new piece of folly?"

"Sah! Mistah Faraday!" gulped the offender, the whites of his eyes distending, "I done tole yo'—seed him!"

"You saw——"

"De Bogey!"

"Nonsense!"

"De yaller man! I'se goofornuffin' if he gets de evil eye on dis heah coon—oh, I feels myself goin' all to pieces—de packing am blown clar out of de cylinder heads!"

Clif discerned that his unnerved companion had been really frightened at something.

Hannibal's teeth chattered, and his eyes were scintillating with profound terror.

"You saw what you call 'a hoodoo,' did you?" demanded Clif bluntly.

"What yo' call him, den, Mistah Faraday! What yo' call de dreffulest chawm-man in all de land? Ugh! Go 'way! Ef I sees him ag'in I'se a dead-gone duck! Yo nebber heah of de yaller man?"

"I never did."

"He's a wahm dawg, I tole yo'! De bogey-hoodoo king, who toles yo' fortune for two bits and bells yo' so yo's blind and dumb and deaf for nuffin' ef he gits rale mad at yo—nebber heah of him?"

"No, but I begin to understand. You fancy you saw some charlatan you have been scared about?"

"No 'lation to Charlotte Ann, as I knows on!" dissented Hannibal solemnly. "I jess know he's dat powerful he kin get at yo' froo iron doors and oak blinds. I seed him an' I'se scairt—'deed I is. Mistah Faraday, took dis chile away from heah soon as yo' kin!"

Hannibal got up, but trembling like a leaf. Clif saw that no bones were broken, and returned towards the horses.

His sable comrade followed so closely that he trod upon his heels staring about with a shiver, gasping out additional information on the subject of "the hoodoo."

Clif gathered that the "yellow man" was some past-

grand master in the art of scaring and robbing superstitious colored people with his "charms" and "spells" and "evil eye."

Hannibal had seen him once before—had heard of him often.

Next to the real horned demon he was the burden of credulous Hannibal's life, and Clif really pitied the fellow's dread, for it was poignant and genuine.

"Come, brace up, Hannibal!" he advised. "You will never be the soldier your namesake was if you get scared at shadows."

"Shaders!" shuddered Hannibal. "Mistah Faraday, I nevah mistook de yaller man!"

"Well, he can't harm you."

"Cawn't he!"

"Then he won't, while I am with you!"

"He ain't 'fraid of cadets."

"Oh, isn't he?"

"'Cause I saw who was with him jess now."

"He had company, did he?"

"Suah!"

"Who?"

"Three cadets."

"W-what!"

Clif uttered the word in sharp disbelief, but Hannibal wagged his head stubbornly.

"Saw dem, Mistah Faraday," he affirmed; "three cadets."

"Who were they?"

"Didn't see de faces—only the uniforms."

"You must have been mistaken."

"Me mistook de gemman I 'sociate with ebry day!" scoffed Hannibal.

Hannibal's "association" with the cadets comprised waiting on table at mealtimes at the academy.

He was a lively, accommodating fellow, however, and the students treated him cleverly.

The ambition of his life was to "jine de navy," and the cadets had lots of fun with him, training him, giving him points that very often led him into trouble.

He had been taken along with the Fourth Class to aid in the culinary department, and had been impressed into

service as an attendant on Clif during a mission of some importance to the academy commandant.

Clif halted a move for the saddle at the positive peculiar statement of his companion.

"Be pretty sure you saw the three cadets, Hannibal," he observed; "it seems queer what they would be doing with your fetich-imposter of a hoodoo."

"Dey was dar—I seed 'em with my eyes, de bogey and de three cadets," asserted Hannibal, deliberately.

"Just wait here a minute."

"Mistah Faraday!" interrupted Hannibal in a delirious gasp, "don't yo' go for to leave me!"

"Why, you're trembling like an aspen!" remonstrated Clif, shaking off the clinging claws of the affrighted Hannibal.

"Yassir, I feels like a ashpan, too, Mistah Faraday! Don't do it! Dis chile die of fright! Eeny—mony—meeny—mi—oh! what is de spell ag'in de witches? Ef I had a crooked ha'r-pin and a cross-eyed rabbit's foot! Ough—ough!"

Clif left Hannibal conjuring up all the incantations he could recall, shiveringly shielding himself between the two horses.

"The foolish fellow—his wits are nearly awry on account of this miserable imposter," soliloquized the cadet, hurrying back to the spot where the episode had started into action. "He insists he saw three cadets. That interests me. We are very near the camp, but what would any of the fellows have in common with such a rascally—one word, there!"

Clif projected the sharp challenge just as he neared the point he was heading for.

There, sure enough, making his way along the fence limit of some little farm, was a personage whom Clif fancied might fit to Hannibal's hoodoo.

His complexion was a cloudy yellow, his hair a reddish mass of kinks; he was thin, rather old, but had two little elfish eyes set in his head full of cunning, vigilance and spirit.

"What do you want?" he demanded, half-pausing.

"I want to ask you a question," answered Clif, catching up with him. "Are you the person they variously desig-

nate as 'the yellow man,' 'the hoodoo,' and other such foolishness?"

The fellow's eyes gave a quick, resentful spark.

"Who told you it was foolishness?" he inquired steadily.

"Drop that phase of it, then—but are you what I indicate?"

"Suppose I am?"

"Then you was just now in the company of three naval cadets?"

"Who told you so?"

"Weren't you?"

"If I was, young man, it is my own individual concern!" answered the fellow, and with a certain force that Clif foresaw he would not find it easy to break down.

The fellow was probably a scamp, but he had nerve, temper and obstinacy, and really Clif had no right to challenge him against his will.

He bestowed a malignant look upon Clif, turned coolly and began talking to himself as if he wished to impress a stranger with a due sense of his importance as a "mystic."

"The spell of prophecy is upon me!" he muttered in a sepulchral tone, moving off and making outlandish gestures in the air.

"Rot!" muttered Clif, nettled at being baffled.

"The occult is loose!"

"I don't know about that!" shouted Clif, abruptly, "but—the dog is!"

The animal in question bounded across the fence at just this juncture.

Dropping all his dignity and assumed mysticism, the hoodoo made a bolt for safety in a decidedly human and ordinary manner.

"Pshaw!" uttered Clif, half-smiling. "a regular mountebank not worth bothering about, any more than the cadets he may have incidentally run across and tried to swindle out of a coin. Here, Hannibal!"

Clif put out his hands to stop the dusky attendant rushing pell-mell towards him.

"Mistah Faraday!" he gasped, "wuss and wuss!"

"What's worse, Hannibal?" insinuated Clif.

"It's lost!"

"Eh?"

"I dropped it or dat hoodoo put a spell on it, but it's gone from de saddle bow!"

"What is—speak?" ordered Clif impatiently.

"De dispatch case!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FOUR SLIPS OF PAPER.

"You have lost——" began Clif with a start.

"De dispatch case!" repeated Hannibal with a groan.

They "did things up in style" at Annapolis, Clif's mischievous little friend, Nanny, the smallest plebe in the academy, had often asserted.

The present cruise and encampment of the Fourth Class proved this, for as much system, discipline and dignity attended every step of the service as if an admiral were in command, and real, grim-visaged war on the boards.

Thus, Lieutenant Disston, of the academy staff of officers, in command of the Fourth Class camp, held tri-weekly communication with the academy superintendent, as would two separated parties in a real campaign keep in constant touch.

By steamer, rail and coach and bicycle, the brief dash with dispatches had in turn been made, in order that a practical familiarization with all modes of travel in case of exigency might result.

This last trip was on horseback, and the concomitant of the dispatch case was quite a new wrinkle, being a suggestion from one of the cadet engineers who "had been with Dewey at Manila."

He had brought back the case in question as a relic, and he loaned it to Clif with the observation:

"Be naval, my dear Faraday—in the lack of real hair-raising effects, be technically naval on all occasions!"

This dispatch case was a mere leather envelope with a stout lock, but each corner was bound with squares of sheet lead.

This had been done so that in case a messenger was pursued and overtaken by the enemy, he might quickly drop it over the side of a boat and it would sink out of sight and reach.

Clif had entrusted the precious receptacle containing the

commandant's instructions for the lieutenant to the keeping of his sable attendant.

Hannibal was so tremendously proud of the distinction conferred, the dignified-looking case to his vivid imagination suggested so much of "rale, ginuine war," that he had kept it in view the entire trip.

Every time they passed a civilian on the road Hannibal fell behind in true "adykong" fashion, and sat up prim and patient, feeling a colonel's adjutant at the least.

He would hold the conspicuous box in full view as importantly as if every one knew that it contained the details of a new secret protocol.

Since twilight, however, Hannibal had secured it in some way at his saddle bow.

In loose fashion, he must have done this, for now in gasping accents of alarm he announced that it was missing—gone.

Clif hurried to the side of his horse, examined its saddle, the ground around.

"I don't like this at all, Hannibal!" he said.

"'Twant my fault, dough, Mistah Faraday!" half whimpered Hannibal.

"But you have let that dispatch case get away from you?"

"No, sah! no sah!" asserted Hannibal strenuously. "It was took, Mistah Faraday! I'se no airthly good, dey tole me gin'rally, but dis chile know 'nuff to hold on to puss-anal property most 'casions. Dat case was took!"

"How? What do you mean?" demanded Clif sternly.

"Woof! eeny—mony—meeny—mi! Dat yaller man, de bogey, de hoodoo, he chawn, he spell, he jess crook his finger, and wouf! dat box fly troo de air!"

"Drop that nonsense!" ordered Clif sharply.

"Yassir, but I'se reaping de fruits of my products—it's de evil eye!"

"Where did you last have the case?"

"My hand was on um right up to de cricketal moment of seeing dat Charlotte Ann."

"You are sure?"

"I could swar to it!"

"Then the case must have fallen off when your horse took that spring."

"'Low it, sah! Hope it, sah! But I'se slightly deffer-

ential. You can sarch, but I'se dubious, dubious, sah, monstrously!"

Clif proceeded back again to the point where all the excitement of the hour had found its beginning.

"Jess as likely look for a mouse in category, as dat case, sah!" mumbled Hannibal.

"In what?" challenged Clif.

"In category—de place whar cats goes to, jess like purgatory for humans. Heah we is, sah. De hoss jumped dar—see de hoof marks? No case, sah—de bogey hab um!"

"Then I must find your bogey," began Clif.

Hannibal expressed a horrified shudder.

"Not widout a crooked har'pin and a cross-eyed rabbit's foot! Don't you did it, Mistah Faraday—you'se lost ef he spells yo'!"

"No, I'll do it with a human foot, if he has taken that dispatch case!" answered Clif, grimly. "But why would he? It is of no value."

"Den drop it, sah, ef it's no value!" pressed Hannibal eagerly. "Let's get to de camp whar it's light and cheersome, t'ankful for a hull skin. Let de ole case go."

"What! when it is borrowed, and contained dispatches from the commandant? Hannibal, I am ashamed of you!"

"Slightly 'shamed of myself, sah!" confessed Hannibal bluntly. "I kin foght men, but I cawn't foght debbils, and dat yallar man——"

"Lend a hand here!" silenced Clif interruptingly. "Now put your eyes to some use and see if you cannot repair the damage you have done."

Hannibal got down on all fours and began groping—Clif probed about with a stick.

"If we had a light, sah?" suggested Hannibal.

Clif found six matches in his pocket. He gave three to his dusky escort, warning him that they were few and precious.

Hannibal, insisting that the hoodoo had spelled the dispatch case in some mystic way, was all for hunting at the direct spot where he had seen "the yallar man" and the three cadets.

Clif kept to the path. He flared the stretch around

where the horse had cavorted in three snaps of his lucifer equipment.

The third showed him a glitter in the grass and he dove for its source.

"All right, Hannibal!" he hailed.

"Got it, sah?"

"Safe and sound."

"Den de hoodoo didn't——"

"Take anything away with him, but your wool-gathering wits. Here, stamp that out!"

Hannibal had started a fire. He had grouped with a little heap of dry leaves several sheets of letter paper.

Their tops must have been torn off in a bunch, Clif noticed, for all presented the same uniform ragged edge.

"Wanted 'lumination, sah," explained Hannibal.

"Yes, but there is no need of leaving it to set the woods on fire."

Clif advanced to kick out the slight blaze. The half-ignited paper sheets attracted his attention.

"Perhaps," he soliloquized, seizing one and turning it over, "no, they are blank on both sides."

His foot raised anew to extinguish the blaze, Clif paused and glanced keenly to where at a little distance a white streak contrasted vividly with the dark ground surface.

Lying upon the grass was a strip of paper, four thicknesses, mere curling ribbons.

"The tops of the blank sheets, torn off and thrown here," murmured Clif, seizing them. "Ah, this is better! Writing. What does it say?"

Clif flipped the four paper fragments in turn. Each bore writing—the beginning of a letter, he fancied.

Evidently the first commencement did not exactly suit the writer, for renewed modifications of the address had resulted.

"Now I shall know the identity of at least one of the three cadets who were holding a pow-wow with the hoodoo!" breathed Clif, ardently. "The paper is white and fresh—they must have dropped it here."

Clif moved nearer to the fire glare to make out the writing on the slips.

"What have you got, Mistah Faraday, sah?" intimated Hannibal curiously.

"Spirit messages, maybe!" joked Clif.

"Oh, sah, be keerful!" shivered the dusky craven; "dey may be ghost candles!"

"Oh, no! They are only——"

Clif uttered a cry of intense astonishment—he had read the first slip:

"Miss Bessie Stuart."

"Incredible!"

A quiver, dubious but electrifying, crossed his frame as he perused the second:

"My Dear Miss Stuart."

"Amazing!"

A grim kind of a growl greeted the third:

"Friend Bessie."

"Monstrous!"

At the fourth Clif Faraday looked daggers—positively dangerous:

"Dear Bessie."

He crunched the tormenting fragments in his powerful fist as if he was wringing the neck of some bitter enemy.

Clif glared all about him, almost fiercely challenging every shadowy woodland form.

He swayed and palpitated amid a raging sea of emotion that threatened to engulf him.

For "Miss Bessie Stuart," "My Dear Miss Stuart," "Friend Bessie," "Dear Bessie," was Clif Faraday's best and particular lady friend.

And who had thus dared to make free with her dear name?

CHAPTER III.

FARADAY IN COMMAND!

"Mistah Faraday?"

"Well, well—I hear you!"

Clif spoke a little testily—Clif was wrought up to a tangle of emotions not at all common to his usually well-regulated mind.

"I 'se glad yo' heah me, sah!" answered Hammibal, with injured humility, "for I called yo' seben—eleben times."

"Inded?"

"Yassir. Yo' seem ordained with cogitation, so 'scuse,

but we is 'proaching de proxenmity of de malitial camp."

"Eh? Oh! That is so!"

Clif aroused himself with a start. Then he gave his shoulders a shake as if to tumble back into the darkness the unpleasant thoughts that bothered him.

For Clif was bothered, seriously—had been during the present grim, silent half-hour ride from the spot where he had found the four strips of paper.

Their presence there was easy to explain—one of the three cadets, espied but not recognized by Hannibal, had dropped them.

Their motive was just as readily guessed at—some cadet was in love with charming Bessie Stuart, now in Annapolis, the guest of Tess Herndon—was trying to "cut out" Clif Faraday.

What else could the aroused naval cadet think, when it was plain to see that the writer had begun with "Miss Bessie Stuart," and wound up with "Dear Bessie?"

"The audacious vandal!" commented Clif, hotly. "Why, I wouldn't call her that myself—except under great provocation!"

Clif did not like all this. He had no particular blanket-mortgage on Annapolis belledom, but the friends he cherished—and especially the lady friends—he also infinitely respected.

So, he instinctively felt like pitching into the fellow who on four sheets of paper could pass from formality to endearment easy as rolling off a log, in a bare four minutes of time.

"He is some blockhead, for he does not appreciate the formalities," concluded Clif, "and Bessie don't like blockheads!"

Clif tried to dismiss the subject from his mind with that, for the lights of the camp were sure enough, as Hannibal proclaimed, directly before them.

All the same, Clif tucked away in a safe pocket written evidence of somebody's intended rivalry, with a firm determination to ferret out "the guilty party" before he was many suns older.

It was enough to make anyone forget all but jovial good comradeship, the greeting and the ensemble of the mess-tent, which Clif took in after a hurried visit to Lieutenant Disston.

The roomy canvas-covered spot was at that time a free-for-all lounging quarters.

Enthroned on a bench, Hannibal was already undergoing a vigorous pumping as to the academy trip.

"Come off, Snowball!" Dismal Joy was jeering incredulously; "your horses swam a river."

"A ribber, sah!"

"And Faraday got excited?"

"Bend on de 'mergency signal! dat's 'zactly what Cap-ting-Commodore Faraday calls out, sah, 'cause we was a mile from land."

"A mile from land?" derided Fishcake. "Why, you conscienceless prevaricator! there isn't a stream in your course more than sixty feet wide!"

"Jesso, sah!" nodded Hannibal, placidly; "a mile from land down, I means. Dat ribber was mighty deep!"

"Good for you! Ho! ho! Hannibal!" encouraged Chawncney De Lawncney, glad to see his opponents rigged.

"Whaffor him call we—us don't belong to he!" spoke Hannibal, with chilling dignity. "I deliberate, Mistah De Lawncney, tings somewhat differential from 'cademy, when yo' call me to pull on yo' boots so yo' kin kick me down de stairs, sah!"

"Anybody inquiring after me at the institution, Hannibal?" insinuated Chawncney, who could never take a hint nor leave well enough alone.

"Dar was, sah!"

"Ah!"

"Young leddy meets me at de gate, hangin' on cadet's arm."

"Knew me, I fawncy?"

"Jesso, for she says, 'Do yo' know when Mistah De Lawncney will be back?'"

"Yes, yes?" urged Chawncney, all smiles and simpers.

"And I said, 'Mebbe not for days and days.'"

"And she said?"

"'How, fortinit'!'"

"Eh?" twanged Chawncney, as a laugh went up.

"She said you was good enough, sah—good for picnics mostly—said her fadder banked de furnace at eight when yo' calls 'round!"

"Next!" piped fat, short Pun'kin, with a guffaw.

"That joke is old as the coals they use in it, you know!" muttered Chawncey.

"Aha! coals! catch on, fellows! Chawncey's got the real English of it, ye know! They don't say 'coal' over across, but 'coals!'"

"Which is quite propah!" insisted Chawncey, flaring up.

"Yes, it's a pretty good thing to get warm by, the coals, when you get caught out in the rain!" smirked Nanny. "Say, people all over the world may be hunting for you, Chawncey!"

"Are they?"

"Mostly showmen—as the fellow so modest he shuts himself clear out, and so fresh they have to put him away to cool."

"Ridiculous!"

"You see, Chawncey," went on the tormentor, "the world is several thousand years older than yourself, and it has been so full of smarter men that their feet stuck out of the dormer window!"

"Yes," put in Pun'kin, "and when you die, Chawncey, the old globe will go a-wagging on, and not one in a million will go to your funeral or ever hear of your death!"

Chawncey swung away followed by his two minions and familiars, McFatricks and Kafoozelum.

"So long to-day yet!" hailed out Trolley. "I wonder if that fellow will ever be anything but a crushed strawberry? Hi, Clif!"

The hero and favorite passed into the tent with a smile intended for everybody, as Chawncey passed out of it with a scowl intended for Clif alone.

"He comes up smiling every time!" grumbled Chawncey.

"He'll soon smile on the other side of his mouth, won't he?" significantly insinuated Kafoozelum.

"By the saints and demons of eight centuries! it will do my soul good to see him wriggle," pronounced McFatricks darkly.

"I would give a hundred dollars to break Clif Faraday's nerve for just five minutes!" flared Chawncey.

"You're going to for less money, aren't you?" demanded his minor light, Kafoozelum.

"I hope so! I've got the money right enough, but there's lacking——"

"What we must make Faraday supply within the next twenty-four hours!"

"What's that?" muttered a sleepy voice.

Vic Rollins was its owner—Vic, tired from an athletic bout that had caused him to stretch out on a bench where he half-snoozed, noticed by few, disturbed by nobody.

In a dreamy way he had caught the menacing tones through the thin canvas against which his head lay.

In a vivid way now he whipped up the flap, looked sharply after the three and peered around inside the tent till he singled out his chum and fellow cadet.

"Clif!" he signaled.

But Clif was the centre of an urgent, inquisitive crowd at just that moment.

He managed finally to disentangle himself from the hopeless task of answering six questions at once concerning affairs at the academy.

Vic led them outside with a serious kind of a face.

"Clif," he said, solemnly, "something is brewing!"

"A storm?" smiled Clif, casting a weather-eye aloft.

"No, something for you especially—Chawncey De Lawncey——"

"Don't waste time on him, Vic!" interrupted Clif. "I am the bee in Chawncey's bonnet on all occasions, and will be, I fancy, as long as he persists in thinking I am a plebe solely and maliciously from the motive of keeping him from forging brilliantly to the front as king and leader of all the cadets!"

"But he thinks it," persisted Vic, "and he will make you trouble."

"How many times has he tried it?"

"I know——"

"And failed. Pshaw! I wouldn't bother my head a second over him—ah, yes, I would!" corrected Clif with a slight start. "Let me ask you a question, Vic: Do you know of any three cadets who were away from camp limits about dusk?"

Clif was putting out a tracer in the direction of the trio Hannibal had affirmed he saw with the hoodoo man.

This one failed in results, however. The early evening

hour had found a good many of the students off on independent strolls, and Vic could not particularize.

"Why, Clif?" he inquired.

"I may tell you later," answered Clif, enigmatically.

"I will be back soon."

Clif made for the orderly's tent, and found that individual smilingly accommodating as he intimated that he would like to look over the camp log.

This was an unofficial record of cruise and camp doings, including written reports from nearly every cadet assigned at one time or another to special duty.

Clif ran these over several times, comparing the handwriting of the page he scanned with the torn slips of paper he had found in the woods.

"It was a cadet who wrote them."

Clif started out with that idea firmly rooted in his mind.

At last he came to a page that was an eye-opener.

Its handwriting tallied precisely with the handwriting of the little paper fragments.

"It was a cadet," filled out Clif complete, "and his name is Chawncey De Lawncey!"

Clif closed the book and put away the incriminating slips of paper, but still sat on the stool reflecting deeply, for the orderly had left the tent.

"What is the game?"

"Game," some sinister plotting, Clif only could attribute to Chawncey De Lawncey.

He could not believe that the exquisite was honestly smitten with Bessie Stuart's prettiness, fetching as that prettiness was.

The sole ambition of Chawncey De Lawncey's life had been "to down Faraday!"

His popularity; his acknowledged leadership had made the anglicized plebe frantic on some occasions, disgruntled on all where Clif shone solely from his own modest but resplendent merits.

Was Chawncey trying to reach him in some underhand way through Bessie?

The naval cadet, outside of feeling slightly indignant that the noodle should even dare to ~~aspire~~ aspire to Bessie's notice, smiled with confidence at any fear that Chawncey would succeed in enlisting Miss Stuart's attention.

Still, Chawncey was up to something, and what? And why? for he had certainly started writing a letter to the ex-girl nurse of the navy.

Further, how came the fragments to be scattered at the meeting place of the three cadets and the voodoo man?

Was Chawncey consulting the oracles? Was——

Clif got up promptly just here. An idea had struck him, and he sought out Vic.

"By the way," he said, locating him, "you were about to tell me something about Chawncey De Lawncey a little while since?"

"Yes, Clif," nodded Vic.

"What?"

"An overheard conversation."

"Between——"

"Chawncey and his two satellites."

"McPatrick and Kafoozelum?"

"Of course."

"What was it?"

"The gist of it was that they were felicitating themselves on soon having you 'smile on the other side of your mouth!'"

"They were, eh?" muttered Clif.

"At a money cost—money ready."

"Ah!"

"'Faraday to supply the two other things needed.'"

"Not specified?"

"No."

"Thanks," said Clif, "I am warned. Now then, Vic——"

"All hands due—what's up?" interrupted his companion with a start.

A bugle call had interrupted both, and its notes were so embracing and peremptory that from all directions cadets began pouring towards quarters tent with briskness and expectancy.

They lined up at a brief command, like the well-disciplined squad they comprised.

There was a hush to busily humming undertones as Lieutenant Disston strode from his tent and faced the battery of eyes focussed upon him.

"Gentlemen," he said, tersely, "I have received a dispatch from the academy, in response to one sent respect-

ing the movements of the class while awaiting the return of the practice ship from Hampton Roads."

"Gorry! I brought dat dispatch froo at de risk of see-ings things in de dark!" grinned Hannibal, lurking in the rear.

"A consultation with the commandant is imperative, so I must be absent for two days at the least," said the lieutenant.

Chawncey De Lawncey turned to look McPatrick squarely in the face, and winked in a sinister, satisfied way.

Little Nanny, the centre of the mischief group, in secret hugged himself deliriously, anticipating royal fun.

"In the absence of an officially appointed substitute," proceeded the lieutenant, "I must choose from material at hand."

Chawncey De Lawncey tried to look unconcerned, but perked up like a prize banty.

"I have consulted marks of scholarship and records of efficiency," went on Lieutenant Disston.

"That lets me out!" whispered Fishcake with a chuckle.

"And I have done what I think the exigencies of the case demand, and what I fancy you will all approve."

There was a flutter of rare expectancy.

"I shall leave——"

An impressive pause, and the flutter grew to an eager waver.

"Faraday in command!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS APPOINTMENT.

"Come alone."

That was the ominous underscored termination of a note which Clif Faraday was regarding with startled, suspicious interest.

He had found it on the little table in quarters tent a few minutes previous.

"Not signed, left here surreptitiously," self-counselled Clif. "Well, I don't bite!"

Clif had twisted up the note as he divined a sell, a lark, so common among his irrepressible fellows.

Now he suddenly bethought himself, unrolled it, inspected it anew, and breathed thoughtfully:

"I think I understand!"

Clif was in quarters tent because he was in command of the cadet camp.

Lieutenant Disston had left late the evening previous, and Clif had found since then in assuming an honorable dignity he had also shouldered several difficult, large-sized responsibilities.

His staunch and loyal adherents were proud as Lucifer of his promotion, yet a hail-fellow-well-met kind of a spirit was abroad.

It took Clif an hour before breakfast to break in the unruly ones and the mischievous.

It took him another hour to so apportion out the duties of the day that the main spirits of folly and disorder—Nanny, isolated on guard duty, and Pun'kin, set at copying dull routine papers—began to grumble as at a grim joke, and threatened to conspire in a second gunpowder plot.

Clif had incidentally been the rounds, and returning to the quarters had found the folded note on his table.

"Faraday of the cadets," it ran, "will find out something that can't be told anywhere else, of vast importance to himself and his friends, if he will be at Giant Glen at four sharp this afternoon."

Then followed the emphasized, italicized line:

"Come alone."

"The 'vast' gives it away!" pronounced Clif, following the line of new suggestiveness. "Chawncey De Lawncey dictated that note."

"Vast," "shawking," "remarkable," were favorite adjectives with Chawncey, and with no one else in the camp.

"It is simple as A B C," ruminated Clif. "The 'smile on the other side of my mouth' act is billed for Giant Glen, four p. m., to-day. Very well—I shall go."

As if in confirmation of Clif's surmise, at that moment the sounds of familiar voices reached him—low, cautious, but distinct.

Chawncey De Lawncey and McPatrick were in secret consultation just outside the door, never dreaming that what they said might penetrate to the ears of its inmate.

It would not have done so, had not Clif's senses been

so keenly on the alert at present that he was sensitive to a point of unusual impressibility.

"He must have got it by this time?" declared Chawncey.

"Of course he has," assented McFatrck, "and we want to be on the move to be on time."

"Suppose he refuses us?"

"Does he dare to!"

"Why not?"

"He's scared, too. Look at this morning! He hasn't given us three—you, me and Kafoozelum—a solitary thing to do. Afraid of posing as a tyrant for one thing, wants to keep in our good graces for another."

"For we can do him a vast power of harm—I see it!" elicited Chawncey. "Well, I'll make the break, you know."

Clif had, indeed, left the three conspirators foot-free all the morning, and with a purpose.

While Vic's warning had not distressed him it had interested, and Clif had allowed the plotters plenty of play-line, hoping they would make some guiding demonstration as to their sinister intentions.

His face did not betray the slightest emotion or unusual interest as Chawncey bolted in, followed by McFatrck.

"I have the honor to—to——" began Chawncey, and stuck there.

"Submit," whispered McFatrck.

"Submit a request for a brief leave of absence, you know."

"For three," prompted McFatrck.

"For three."

"At three?" purposely misapplied Clif, making a note on the official tablet.

"No! no!" hurried Chawncey, "at four. That is—I mean—from three to five—yes, that's it."

Clif's eye quickened at the stumble into his trap—Chawncey, too, had a date at four, it seemed. The inference was palpable.

"Botanizing," volunteered McFatrck.

"Exactly," lied Chawncey.

"It is granted," said Clif. "The unblushing villains!" Clif took no further interest in their present move-

ments, except to watch till he saw Chawncey, McPatrick and Kafoozelum leave the camp.

"North," murmured Clif, "and Giant Glen is north. Is it hardly worth my while to go to the trouble of a solitary tramp, the risk of a tussle or a scurvy coward attack, to teach these poltroons that right is still might, and that 'downing Faraday' is a long lane journey? If it wasn't that the same may throw some light on the four mysterious paper slips, I would let it pass, but under the circumstances—no!"

Clif made his decision without a thought of personal peril.

"I will go."

Then, after another brief period of reflection he added:

"And I will 'come alone,' as invited."

When the cadet commander left camp an hour later, he had made the only provision he deemed called for necessary to cover a possible three-hours' absence.

Clif had deputed Vic to assume his place, and he did so without explaining the motive of his projected departure.

"Wearied of the cares of glory so soon, eh?" joked his chum.

"Put it that way if you like, Vic," smiled back Clif.

"See here, let me understand one thing," observed Vic with mock gravity. "Temporarily I am high jinks, grand mogul of this camp?"

"Oh, you won't do anything terrific!"

"I will do one thing that your tender feelings don't seem to allow," retorted Vic.

"What is that?"

"That abominable De Lawncey clique have been bragging that you are so afraid of them you favored them with a loafing spell this morning."

"I had my reasons, Vic," answered Clif.

"Well, if they try any dowdy airs on me, you'll find them in the guard tent——"

"Hardly, Vic!" quizzed Clif, starting away.

"How——"

"They are off on a leave of absence."

"Say!"

In a flash Vic saw that something was on the tapis.

"Tell you when I get back," stated shrewd Clif, moving away for good.

Giant Glen was something over a mile distant. Clif made a leisurely detour to reach its vicinity.

It lay in a kind of shadow, young as the afternoon was.

Its fringe of shrubbery kept Clif's eyes and ears at a keen edge to watch out for the lurkers and pitfalls.

He had proceeded quite a distance down its length without meeting a soul or discovering any indication of welcome, friendly or otherwise, when a whistle rang out.

Clif came to a halt—the signal was not far ahead. It echoed behind him and then at either side.

"Who is the fourth?" tranquilly propounded Clif.

Chawncey, McFatriek and Kafoozelum he was prepared for—who could the stranger be?

Clif folded his arms, braced himself firmly, and tried to look and listen in four directions at one and the same time, as he realized that he was completely surrounded.

He was not a whit fearful of personal violence, and he was mightily curious to learn why he had been brought here.

"Suppose I am entirely mistaken about Chawncey and——"

Clif's soliloquy halted there—a rush checked it.

Shielded by the shrubbery, four persons had moved up on him, had closed in now.

Their dash from covert was simultaneous and effective—so much so that Clif, tactical as he had decided initial lack of aggressiveness, was instantly regretful that he had not put up a fighting front.

His assailants did not wear cadet uniforms.

On the contrary, they were attired in the rough costume of farm laborers, or the like.

Each one was masked, and in the brief glance afforded Clif could not really say that the suspected cadet conspirators formed three-quarters of the outfit.

Two of the intruders had sprung to his side. They seized and imprisoned his arms so rapidly and deftly that it looked to him as if they had been practicing the move.

There was a dead, grim silence. Clif struggled, but no one spoke a word.

Clif was a quick thinker, a lightning calculator.

Since he had now thrown away the chance of a sturdy

resistance, or even bold assault where he might have unmasked his assailants, Clif determined to benefit by the forced role of fearless helplessness.

The enemy should make the first move towards enlightenment as to their motives in appointing the present tryst.

The nervy naval cadet wondered what the first demonstration would be—threats? some startling intelligence dramatically hissed into his ear?

Not at all! Clif experienced a qualm and gave a violent jerk as the two persons who had pressed close confronting him whipped into view two weapons.

One flashed out a knife—that was alarming.

But the second brought into evidence a pair of long, sharp scissors—and that was puzzling.

CHAPTER V.

A BROKEN TRAIL.

"Quick!" whispered the person at Clif's right hand.

"Clip!" breathed the one at his left.

"And nip!" added the first speaker.

"'Quick!' 'clip!' 'nip!'" repeated Clif with force. "You scoundrels! What are you up to?"

He hoped to make his assailants speak out loud, but this they refused to do.

Clif struggled, but it was four against one. The twain at his arms held on stoutly the two in front planted themselves so near that he could not use his feet to any advantage.

Suddenly the strange undertoned directions were followed out.

The fellow with the scissors made a grab for Clif Faraday's head, gripped a generous handful of hair.

Snip! went the scissors in his other fingers, and Clif could see that he had clipped free a liberal lock.

The other fellow had circled Clif's wrist in a tight clasp.

With his knife he made a light graze of the flesh, bringing the blood.

It ridged up in a line of little dots.

Instantly from his breast the fellow drew what Clif took for a section of a blotting pad.

He pressed this over the slight wound, then — —

Rap!

One of the four or all four in union administered a blow directly on the side of Clif's head.

Clif could not analyze the assault, for it was sudden, violent, sense annihilating.

He experienced a lapse of vitality, and opened his eyes to find himself lying prone on the ground.

His late assailants were as scarce as if they had never existed.

"Well!" commented Clif volubly, sitting up.

Clif looked at his hand in mystifying stupefaction.

"A mere scratch," he breathed, "but why done?"

He felt along the side of his head. There was a bump there where he had been so vigorously rapped, but across its surface he could feel where quite a lock of hair had been removed.

"Hair clippers, branders—what in the world are they after?" ejaculated the puzzled cadet.

If some one was attempting purposely to bewilder him they could not have thought out a more baffling means, Clif theorized, yet putting together those mysterious bits of paper, Chawncey's connection with the same, Chawncey's apparent presence with the mysterious four, Clif decided that the lock of hair was to cut some important figure in the plans of the conspirators, whatever they might be.

He got up slowly and arranged his disordered attire; he peered up and down the glen.

"Of course they are gone, and, of course, they have left no trace," he concluded. "I have the worst end of it at the outset, it seems, for they have left me in a muddle of doubt and uncertainty."

Clif tried to figure out where he was to "come in smiling on the other side of his mouth."

"Chawncey De Lawncey is a noodle, McPatrick a glum blunderhead, Kafoozelum a mere feeble echo of both," he soliloquized. "They are given to making all kinds of erratic breaks, but all this trouble for a lock of hair!—I see some one."

Quite a distance down the glen so sure was Clif that he had detected a movement amid some shrubbery that he dropped to concealment instant.

Then, on true scouting tactics, in which he was an expert, he made for the spot under suspicion.

Clif came alongside a perfect breastwork of stunted bushes to be enabled a peer through and beyond without his approach being observed or his presence detected.

Some astonishment filled his mind as he stared.

One of his recent assailants was in view—Clif recognized him from his attire.

Another thing: The mask he had worn lay on the ground at his feet, carelessly trodden on as he moved about briskly.

Like three mummies, three suits of clothes lay spread out on the grass.

The man had been smoothing them out, and, it was evident preparatory to rolling them up into one bundle.

These suits were the ones the three recent companions of the fellow had worn—again Clif's keen sight and memory helped him out.

The man, now unmasked, had nothing murderous, sinister or formidable in his face or manner.

He struck Clif as an ordinary farmer of the district, and a smile wreathed his lips as if he had just been indulging in some folly or fun that pleased him.

Clif instantly placed the man as an innocent helper of the cadet conspirators.

He decided to tackle him without delay, and he forced his way through the bushes and stood in plain view before the fellow had been well warned by the rustling of the twigs.

"Hello!" plumped the man, turning sharply.

He looked pretty blank as he apparently recognized Clif, and his face lengthened as he met the stern, accusing look fixed full upon him.

"Where are they?" demanded Clif, pointing a steady finger at the outstretched clothes.

"Hum!" stammered the man, and turned red as a beet.

"Can't you speak?" urged Clif. "You seem to know how to act!"

"Ha!" breathed the fellow with an uneasy tremble, "You see——"

"Well?"

"Larks is larks!"

"The winged ones are."

"Cadets will be cadets!"

"Good!" muttered Clif under his breath. "That's something—it was the De Lawncey crowd." Then, aloud, he added:

"They won't long, assaulting peaceably inclined citizens."

"Oh, come now!"

"You come! and out with the truth, quick, sharp and unadorned, or you may have a taste of the law you won't fancy!" observed Clif, and his auditor looked pretty badly scared. "Where are the three cadets who just wore those three suits of clothes?"

"Bless me, if I can tell!"

"What did you assault me for just now?"

"Me or them?" propounded the man.

"You."

"Because I was hired to."

"Rent yourself out for that measly kind of business, do you?"

The man looked ashamed.

"Now then?"

"You mean——"

"Why did they assault me?"

"I don't know; honor bright, cadet, I don't! See here, don't look at me that way! What's the harm done?"

"What!" cried Clif, "you don't call it harm scaring a fellow to death?"

The man gave Clif a puzzling look.

"Say," he half chuckled, "you scairt!"

Clif had to smile—it was a rude but graceful compliment.

"Well, I am pretty curious, at least," he proceeded.

"All right, and I'll squarely confess my share in it."

"Do so."

"As I say, I was only hired."

"When?"

"This morning."

"By three cadets?"

"Yes."

"What did they want?"

"I run a farm. They wanted me to provide three disguises and rig up four masks. I was to help them."

"To do what, did they say?"

"Play a joke on a fellow cadet."

"What was the joke?"

"Scare him, mark him."

"But the object?"

"There they rattled me. Silly as a schoolboy's prank, I voted it, but that wasn't my concern. It was harmless, that's all I saw to."

"I don't blame you, then," said Clif, frankly, and the man looked relieved. "You are sure they dropped no inkling of what their motive was in scalping me?"

"Not quite so bad as that! But not an ink!"

"Nor where they have gone to?"

"No. Only, one thing——"

"That is?"

"They haven't gone back to the camp."

"You are sure of that?"

"That isn't its direction, is it?" questioned the man, pointing in the one exactly opposite.

"You are right. They went that way?"

"Last I saw of them. Hitting wasn't in the programme. They lied there, and I was riled," explained the farmer. "When I saw you was only slightly stunned, though, and that without even getting pale, I sort of qualified. I helped them disrobe. They paid me, lit out, and they went that way."

Clif made a start as if to promptly pursue the trail thus given.

The farmer scanned his fine, manly face in a longing sort of a way. He suddenly put out his hand.

"Say, hold a bit!" he dissuaded.

"What for?"

"For a minute."

"Make it worth my while, then."

"I'll try to. You strike me as of a mold different to the three fellows who hired me."

"Do I?"

"Slightly, and I want to do right."

"Make a start if you see a way, then."

"I will. They acted queer, and that knock on the head was sneaky."

"It was good and heavy!"

"Lead weight."

"Oh!"

"I don't approve of lead weights myself, and I didn't approve of that crowd all the way here, where they disrobed."

"So?—"

"I got suspicious, so to speak."

"You are trying to lead up to something, I can see that," said Clif.

"You're clever—I am."

"And now give it a name!"

"Well, then, getting suspicious, it struck me—as it seems to have struck you—that those fellows lied when they talked about simply scaring a fellow."

"Good logic!"

"Because, they must have known what I plainly see."

"That is?"

"You aren't of the scary kind."

"Thank you."

"I made up my mind I would keep track of them."

"Did you do it?"

"I tried."

"Good for you!"

"Guess the clothes are safe here. You come along. I reckon it's only right and proper, since you have acted so handsomely, to put my clew in your hands."

"Oh! you have a clew?"

"If it hasn't failed, for I intended to follow them up when I had leisure."

"What is it?"

"A spool of thread."

"Show me."

"You come."

Clif spurred up magically. He was working good results out of handling his innocent assailant just right.

The man led the way out from among the bushes to the clear routeway of the glen.

"I fixed that," he said.

"I see," murmured Clif.

A spool of fine white thread had been so attached to the loop of a flexible branch that it would pay out on pressure slick as a ball of string from an oiled pivot.

It was nearly paid out to the nubbin now, and was stationary.

"Well?" insinuated Clif, guessing, but not sure.

"Crooked pin, fish hook fashion; other end of the thread trailing from the coat tail of the fellow they called—what was it? Oh, yes! Chance the Lancers."

"If your clew does not fail he will be mischance, and he won't feel much like dancing the 'Lancers!'" remarked Clif. "I will follow this up."

"Hope you luck!"

"Thanks."

"And sorry I meddled with you at all."

"That is all right, for it may bring about results I aimed for in first coming here."

"I see you're a shrewd one!"

Clif did not return the compliment—the man's spool of thread clew Clif did not prize very hopefully.

The spool and the thread running from it were both stationary.

Chawncey might have noticed the trailing thread, suspected its purpose, and detached it.

Again, it might have broken, a brief distance advanced, but Clif was patient, painstaking and indefatigable.

It had broken. Clif had gone a bare fifty yards following up the line of white not hard to pursue, when its end was reached.

Clif kept on, however. The three cadets had gone in the direction he was pursuing.

"There it is again!" he uttered with renewed vim.

The thread had broken, but not at the point of contact with the human nubb'n from whom it was unreeling.

The force had been bulked by some obstacle back towards the spool. The thread pendant from the person to whom the pin end was attached had trailed on.

Beyond here it must have broken again, for this section of the thread was stationary also.

Clif followed a leading of nearly a hundred yards in and out among bushes, down a dip, and there pin and thread end Clif found caught in a thorn bush.

"Where did they go from here?" questioned Clif, and a new indication immediately answered.

It was a tap-tap-tapping. At first Clif thought it was some tree bird. Then a human voice settled his opinion.

"Knock harder!"

"McFattrick!" murmured Clif.

Clif could make out neither door nor knocker. He sought to trace the sound.

A pile of dirt from an excavation had been grown over thick with weedy verdure.

This proved a screen till Clif crept nearly to its top.

In a vine-choked depression, half-natural, half-artificial, was a wretched structure of boards and stones.

It had a door. Hammering on it was Chawncey. By his side were his two familiar satellites.

Clif ducked his head low for fear of being seen, held his breath lest the least flutter should betray him.

Some one challenged Chawncey from the inside just then, for the hum of a human voice, but vague, reached Clif's hearing.

Then the door was noisily opened, and a man holding a half-cigar peered out.

"Oh! you cadets, eh?" he uttered, not particularly friendly of welcoming.

"Yes, it's us," answered Chawncey. "You told us to come——"

"I know I did, provided——"

"We've brought the money."

"Have you?"

"Of course, and something better."

"Ay, and what's that, now?"

"The things you want from Faraday."

"The lock of hair?"

"The lock of hair."

"And the drop of blood?"

"And the drop of blood."

"Good enough!"

"Why!" breathed Clif, "this is positively curdling!"

What could cadets or man want with these grewsome memoirs of a fellow being?

The man stepped out to push the rattletrap of a door farther open so all could enter.

As the sunlight fell upon his face Clif recognized him instantly.

It was "the hoodoo."

CHAPTER VI.

HOAXED!

The door closed on the three cadets and their gaunt yellow host, and Clif Faraday was shut out from sight and hearing.

Not for long, however, for Clif's curiosity had rarely been so aroused.

He acted boldly, almost recklessly, for he considered that the three cadets were approaching or meeting the culminating point in their conspiracy, and he wanted to be in at the active finish.

A section of the roof of the dilapidated structure had slid off bodily at some time in the past, and this tilting at an angle rested against the side of the house.

Clif risked being seen from outside or inside. He made an audacious run for this shelter and gained it.

At his elbow instantly sounded voices, the echo of moving footsteps.

Some clay that had stopped up chinks had dried and fallen out of a wide crack. Clif widened it further.

The enterprising cadet now had one large grim room of the wretched hovel in full view.

A queer spectacle was afforded. In a broken chair at a broken table sat the hoodoo.

He had spread a red cloth over it into which was sewed in faded, tarnished tinsel all sort of cabalistic symbols.

On his head he had set a kind of a crown—brassy, battered and with cheap colored pieces of glass stuck in here and there.

In a row, like gaping verdant greens seeing a three-card monte man perform for the first time, Chawncey, McPatrick and Kafoozelum were ranged in an awed and absorbed fashion.

"The precious mantle of King Theebaw and the golden crown of the magician of Madagascar being in place, we will proceed!" whanged the brazen-faced charlatan.

Clif could scarcely credit the impressive effect of this cheap oratory on the gawking trio, evidently "stuck on magic!"

"Be speedy, for I am in communication with the

spirits," continued the impostor, "and must return to their company."

"You promised me a spell, you know," observed Chawncey.

"Exactly. You have an enemy."

"I have!"

"You seek to rise on the ruins of his fallen grandeur."

"I do."

"That must mean me!" smiled Clif to himself.

"You would like to win the love of a certain young lady he fancies."

"Say! I've told you about that!" broke in Chawncey with ardor. "Never mind the rest. You get that girl so she drops him, and I'll call the world mine!"

"It is easy for me," vaunted the hoodoo.

"Then make it easy for me!" urged Chawncey. "I would rather cut Faraday out and humiliate him, show my paces before the crowd with her on my arm, than cut into all his popularity and ability and such, big as it is."

"You brought me the girl's address," went on the hoodoo.

"The villains! bandying her name about in such ridiculous goings on!" flared Clif, hotly.

"You wrote her name four times. I spelled the fragments, east to the four cardinal points of the compass, at our last interview."

"I understand the torn strips of paper now!" murmured the ardently listening Clif.

"And you said," put in Chawncey, eagerly, "that if I would bring you a lock of hair and a drop of blood of my rival, it would be all right."

"Yes," nodded the impostor.

"Rival!" fairly snorted Clif, and he nearly brought his frail shelter down across him in ruins, for he felt like kicking something.

"We've got them," resumed Chawncey, "at great trouble. There!" and he produced the lock of hair, "and there!" and he placed beside it on the table the section of blotting pad which he had pressed to Clif's hand after it was cut.

"Um—ah!" purred the hoodoo. "Very good—very good! All is now ready."

"Can you fix him?" asked Chawncey, anxiously.

"He becomes a mere shadow of his former self when I make my charm."

"He does!"

"The girl suddenly falls in love with you."

"That's wonderful, you know!" spluttered the credulous Chawncey.

"I take that hair and that blood and burn them in a censer over my magic lamp."

"Can we see you?"

"Oh, no! that would break the spell."

"Go on, then."

The hair crisps into letters—I make words of 'em, understanding the occult. I then take the ashes, put them in an hour-glass, along with some sand made out of diamonds of the first water."

"That's diamonds in soak with a vengeance!" commented Kafoozelum, but Chawncey frowned on the attempted joke.

"Grinding up diamonds is no easy task and costs money," observed the charlatan, significantly.

"Here's what I promised you," caught on Chawncey, handing over a roll of bills.

"Cheap at the money; cheap at the money!" sighed the mountebank, but snugly tucking away the cash. "Time was when royalty paid big stamps for such as me!"

"Royalty, eh?" fluttered Chawncey, abeam, the allusion striking a tender spot.

"I shall soon run these 'sands of life!'"

"How soon?"

"In three days come to me."

"Here?"

"Right here."

"And what then?" asked Chawncey.

"I give you a paper containing the signs you must mark under the chair where your rival sits three times in three hours."

"And then?"

"He's settled."

"No more Faraday!" muttered McPatrick.

"No more Faraday, the tyrant!" corrected Chawncey.

"Why! as I understand, Mr. Necromancer, you will kill all his ambition?"

"Stretch it out colder than a dead herring!"

"Little fellows can buff him around, pull his nose, push him off the sidewalk, and——"

"He won't have the energy to resent it—exactly," blandly declared the hoodoo.

"His strength will go with it, too, will it?" inquired McFatrik, with anxiety.

"He will retrograde into a mere lightweight wreck."

"And the girl?"

"She will feel as if a veil had been torn from her eyes. I must terminate the present interview, gentlemen. In three days. Yes, indeed, the young lady will turn from him as if he was a leper, and will greet you as—the drawling, crawling lunkhead of a ninny and a sneak that you are!"

Those last words were not spoken for Chawncey's benefit.

Clif heard them, for he had his ear still to the crack, while the three departing victims of credulity were moving, off outside chattering like magpies.

"Bah!" continued the hoodoo, and he swept the hair and blotter to the floor with a scornful snort. "Bah!" he said, wadding up "the mystic mantle," and tossing it into a corner. "Bah!" he repeated, dropping "the crown of King Theebaw," and giving it a kick clear across the room.

"Ha! ha!" chorused a like derisive voice.

Clif was just debating with himself what he would do, and his inclination was to proceed back to camp.

The last words of the hoodoo, his unceremonious treatment of his magic paraphernalia, instantly settled the question that the fellow was simply a fake of the worst kind and the credulous Chawncey his dupe complete.

Clif was fairly angry at himself for attributing at any time the slightest importance to Chawncey's movements.

He was further disgusted to think that any rational cadet would allow himself to be taken in by the flimsiest tricks of charlatanism, exploded with even the most ignorant people a quarter of a century back.

"Wasted time!" Clif had muttered quite tersely. "All there is to it is that Chawncey nourishes a spite against me too petty for me to notice or resent. I will drop the affair right here. He is money out. As to Bessie, I won't even ever mention this arrant nonsense to her."

Thus Clif had settled the matter, and was resolute to abandon the affair and get back to camp and more serious duties, when the charlatan's jeer at Clawncsey and contemptuous treatment of his mystic trappings were followed by that chorused, derisive—

"Ha! ha!"

Clif was checked under his shelter at once, interested anew.

At first, as he saw no other person in the room, he wondered if he had not been attracted by an echo.

Then he knew better, for the jeering "Ha! ha!" was repeated.

In a dark corner of the room was an old chest.

Its cover now went up, and out stepped a new actor on the scene.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL IS A MUDDLE!

Clif took a long stare at the man getting out of the chest.

He climbed out on the floor, and puffed and panted as if he had been suffering for the lack of air.

"Whew!" he ejaculated, "that was a hot box, and no mistake!"

He drew the sleeve of his coat over his face to wipe away the perspiration, as he spoke.

As he did this, that face changed its aspect to a degree that fixed Clif's attention still closer.

Clif had fancied the man to be a negro, at first sight.

Now he saw that the fellow was only blacked up—disguised.

Streaks of white showed where he had brushed away the soot or burned cork, and he appeared grotesque without realizing it.

"Don't want any more of that!" he remarked.

"There was no especial need of it, was there?" insinuated the hoodoo. "You might have sat in a dark corner comfortable and have passed for some colored client or humble assistant of the great necromancer!"

"Huh! the cheap noodles!"

"Yes, they bite easy."

"Got rid of them, I hope?"

"Quite."

"In three days, though?"

"I shan't be here three hours. Of course, we got what information we wanted from them day before yesterday, but I led them on to gull them and ease any suspicions they might have indulged."

"Suspensions? Those arrant lunkheads!" scoffed the other. "Why, they're soft as soap! Honestly, I wouldn't credit an Esquimaux of good sense taking in what went down with them slick as grease!"

"Well, they are disposed of, you are safe, and the real business of the occasion lies before us."

Clif's senses became animated. The "real business" had a certain unctuous and promising sound to it.

He decided to linger and listen, at all hazards. In the swim of something of a mystery, considerable of a plot, feeble though its promptings might be, he was anxious to glean the details.

The hoodoo had simply hoaxed Chawncey De Lawncey, or rather trapped him, and had sent him about his business stuffed full of promises and predictions he never meant to fulfill.

The essence of the affair now resolved itself practically down to the two in sight and hearing.

Had not the hoodoo alluded to "information" secured from Chawncey, Clif would have simply considered that they were scheming mountebanks who had gulled a stake out of a soft mark, and were ready to move on to new fields and pastures green.

That word set the naval cadet thinking, however, and he lay where he was, eagerly awaiting further developments.

"You're slightly mottled!" pronounced the hoodoo, with a glance at his companion's face.

"Am I?"

"Yes, rubbed off most of the black. Hope you didn't show up that way coming here?"

"No, it's crouching in that stuffed up old chest in hiding. See if those three have gone."

"Oh! they're gone."

"Then let me get outside and take a breath of air. I've been nearly suffocated."

Out of view and hearing the duo passed. Clif was disappointed and impatient.

Almost immediately, however, they reappeared, and their voices reached him quite as distinctly as before they lounged across a heap of stones not ten feet away from the cadet's place of hiding.

"Now, then," said the hoodoo, "what's the programme?"

"No change that I know of," answered the other.

"Have you heard?"

The blacked up man drew a letter from his breast and waved it somewhat triumphantly.

"From——?" insinuated the hoodoo, with a meaning blink.

"As expected," enigmatically to Clif answered the other.

"Good! The address was all right, then?"

"Had to be. It won't do to make any missteps or blunders in a matter concerning Faraday."

"What!" thrilled Clif.

Here was an eye-opener, a vast surprise, a key-note of mystery that made Clif stare, start and marvel.

A sledge-hammer sort of a shock seemed to have struck the lurking cadet, the motive and effects of which he could in no wise understand.

"Seems to me," remarked the hoodoo, "that you might have simplified matters right at the start."

"How's that?" demanded his companion.

"By cornering Faraday himself."

"And raising an instantaneous hue and cry!"

"Oh! there's safe hiding places hereabouts."

"Besides, it would have been useless."

"So?"

"Yes, so! Do you happen to know Faraday?"

"I have met him once."

"But you have heard of him?"

"Oh! these cadets are bragged about!"

"Yes, Faraday is, in fact!"

"They all think they own the earth."

"Well, candidly, my friend, Faraday about does, really!"

"Oho!"

"So far as pluck, luck and get-there come in."

"Can't always favor him."

"They do, mostly, and I don't burn my fingers with a proposition wiser men than I have found it useless to tackle."

"Then this prodigy——" sneered the hoodoo.

"You've hit the word; Faraday is just that, and because he surely is, I didn't make the mistake of gobbling him up and having an elephant on my hands."

"You think he would turn out that?"

"I think red-hot irons wouldn't force from him an admission, a compromise, the concession of one minute point of principle, where he was personally concerned."

"I'd make him concess, I'll wager!"

"You wouldn't, and it would be wasted time. We are wasting it now. Faraday is my play, but Faraday at a safe distance, Faraday reached through others. Read that letter now."

Clif found himself plunging into an eddying, baffling vortex of mystery.

The blacked up man he had never seen before—how came it that he handled his alleged qualifications so glibly?

What, most of all, was he aiming at, and what in the name of wonder and secrecy were these precious two up to?

To the point of their possible present intentions the whole affair was now concentrated, and the hoodoo, Chawncsey's scheming, the letters to Bessie, were trivial past part of a plot that, if impressive words went for anything, was about to show an unusually ugly head.

The hoodoo scanned the letter presented by his companion.

He nodded most approvingly as he took in its contents.

"Good! splendid! prime!" he complimented; "the game just falls right into your hands."

"For the mere asking."

"Unless Faraday gets an inkling?"

"Too late now to serve him, if he does."

"Yes, the machinery is started. You just got the letter?"

"An hour since."

"And you propose?"

"To go back to my den like the wild, hunted creature I am till I get the whip-hand swing of the whole combination."

"I'm with you—tired of this rat-haunted, mold-chilling hole of a place!" said the hoodoo. "Wait till I pack up the few traps I care to carry along."

Clif had heard every word spoken; he recalled, reviewed, weighed them over now.

They afforded cold comfort; not one clear, tangible statement had been made; merely hints.

Not understanding the base of the sinister structure of mystery, fraud or crime these fellows were rearing, Clif was still all at sea.

The conversation had simply served to whet his curiosity, to torment him with the conviction that some scheme against his well-being was brewing, without his being able to surmise what it was or why projected.

The blacked-up man sat thoughtfully scanning the ground during the absence of his comrade.

Meantime he took the letter that had been returned to him and began tearing it up.

Clif viewed hungrily the sheet of paper being divided, quartered, torn across and dwindling into minute fragments.

That missive—having bearing on the case, he was confident—perused, might prove decidedly enlightening.

"All right!" sang out the hoodoo, reappearing lugging two satchels.

The blacked-up man gave the torn-up letter a high toss in the air.

The fragments dispersed like snowflakes, some particles scurrying far and wide with the breeze.

"What you got in there?" inquired their late possessor, indicating the nearest satchel.

"Togs. I'll take care of this, you bring along the other," and he dropped it and his companion seized its handle.

"Heavy enough!" commented the latter, not at all favorably.

"Is it? If you don't like——"

"Valuable?"

The hoodoo laughed.

"Simply ballast," he winked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Mostly bricks."

"Bricks?"

"Yes; that gives weight when I strike a hotel. Understand?"

"I don't."

"Good thing to leave behind in lieu of a paid-up board bill!" chuckled the hoodoo.

"I see; you are slicker than I am."

"Yes, you wasn't very slick in that wretched — affair."

Clif would have given worlds to have caught the name he missed.

An "affair" was designated, but the designation was blurred, swallowed up, drowned out by the blacked-up man disgustedly dropping his satchel to the ground, whereby its dubious contents clinked and clattered noisily.

"Say!" he announced, "I'm not going to tire myself out carrying this useless rubbish."

"All right. I guess I'll leave it, come to think. If your large promises bear fruit I can pay up my hotel bills respectably for a spell. The satchel itself is worth something, though——"

"Oh, don't bother! I'll buy you a new satchel."

"Good! Leave it behind, then."

The hoodoo started up. His companion lifted anew his recent burden.

He gave it a swing to fling it out of prominent view.

Crash!

"Pinned!"

The man had aimed for the side of the house and the satchel struck it.

It slammed, dropped, then that crash came, and then, close following on its heels, Clif's panting, palpitating utterance.

"Pinned" he was, for the sheltering roof section that had slipped off the house and stood a tilt went flat in ruins.

Its bulging mass of shingles and beam spaces kind of fitted him, and he was not revealed.

The crushing contact was not at all agreeable, however, and Clif did not remain pinned down any longer than he could help.

He kept an eye on the two departing friends until they were well over the dirt heap, then he struggled to free himself.

Clif had to be cautious, for they were still in hearing range.

He came out of the nest of ruins dusty and scratched.

The others had a good three minutes' start of him, but Clif hurried to the top of the dirt heap.

They were not in sight, and with a choice of three directions, but no positive clew of guidance, Clif rather blankly surveyed the prospect.

"It won't do to let them get away from me with only half their most interesting story told," he declared. "I shall soon strike their trail—ah! there's that unfortunate letter."

Clif stooped and picked up several bits of the torn missive.

Had the bulk of these not been dispersed all over the landscape he might have considered their collection, for he was clever at piecing up fragments with his patient pertinacity, steady nerve and keen eyesight.

He was so clever, in fact, that as he casually scanned a mere two letters on the first fragment he inspected, Clif gave a gasp and a stare as if a volume of intelligence faced him instead.

"Never!" he shouted, wildly.

Over the remaining fragments Clif ran fingers and eyes in a frantic, startled kind of a way.

"It can't be!" he gasped.

Twenty letters, all disconnected, some only half in evidence, his eye had taken in.

Twenty shocks and thrills they seemed to produce, however.

Clif Faraday, absolutely overcome, dropped helplessly to the ground.

"Bessie!" he gasped, and his heart sank like lead.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOO LATE!

"No trace!"

That was the report that came to Clif Faraday at noon on the day following his remarkable adventures at the hovel den of the hoodoo.

Vic Rollins submitted the same, and he had just been

preceded by Ridgley, come into quarters from exactly the opposite direction.

When Clif had settled beyond dispute that the letter the blacked-up man had received had been written by no less a person than Miss Bessie Stuart, his worst fears were aroused.

Usually the peril of a friend stimulated Clif to prompt heroic measures.

In the case of a beautiful, innocent girl, however, the first shock was that of terror, amid the appealing tenderness of her naturally helpless position.

Clif had been fairly overcome at the astounding revelation of the hour, for he instantly divined that the real motive of the hoodoo and his companion was in some way to harm and hamper Bessie Stuart.

For fully ten minutes after his identification of Bessie's handwriting, Clif sat where he had dropped, thinking furiously.

These fellows had got her address from the blunder-headed Chawncey De Lawncey, and had managed to inveigle her into a correspondence.

What was their purpose, for by their own acknowledgment, here was the start of a plot—a sinister one, surely, and affecting Clif himself further down the line?

Tormented with a thousand distracting doubts, Clif lost valuable time.

He aroused himself as with a spur to recover wasted opportunity and pursue the two men.

Within thirty minutes, however, he realized that they had got an effective start of him.

A new idea struck him. The naval cadet turned hasty steps homewards.

Clif Faraday was in command of the camp, therefore the duties of the hour held him bound to routine, and he did not seek to shirk them.

Clif Faraday was also in command of his friends, however, and soon he had loyal Vic, staunch Ridgely and the tireless Fisheake in active counsel and sympathy.

Clif stated all the details of the affair as comprehended by himself up to date.

There was a general assent to his decision. Two villains had taken advantage of Chawncey De Lawncey's

credulity and low spite to extract information regarding Clif and his friends.

They had secured Bessie Stuart's address, they were using it to further some ulterior designs.

Behind it, from what they had disclosed, there was surely an intent to reach Clif himself.

The underlying motive, the real essence of the plot, was shrouded in dense obscurity, but the immediate movements of the schemers seemed easy to anticipate, and they might be headed off.

The result was that Clif's friends, furnished with a description of the hoodoo and the blacked-up man, deputizing themselves to make a thorough search for the scoundrels.

Clif could not see how the schemers could reach Bessie without proceeding to Annapolis.

—He half feared they had headed that way, as first Ridgeley, then Vic and finally Fishcake came into camp reporting that uniform discouragement—"No trace!"

"The men have probably left the vicinity," suggested Clif.

"I feel pretty sure of that," nodded Fishcake. "Our search has been thorough as a police drag-net."

"I don't see for myself what further we can hope to do here," murmured Vic.

"Here?" insinuated Clif.

"There may be an Annapolis end, you know?"

"Oh! none of us could think of going to Annapolis," hastily observed Clif, but his eyes met those of the last speaker with a certain ardent expression.

"I don't see why not," demurred Vic, looking pretty positive.

"Explain yourself."

"We know that these schemers are aiming to harm Miss Stuart in some way."

"We fear it, yes."

"They will make their next break where she lives."

"Probably."

"Do you think it is friendly or chivalric to leave her unwarned or unprotected?"

"Oh!" said Clif. "I have attended to that phase of the matter."

"You have?"

"First thing this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I sent Hannibal over to Wellsville with a telegram for Bessie."

"Capital!" voiced Ridgely.

"That fixes it!" nodded Fishcake.

"I told her to be suspicious of everybody—not to leave the house on any pretence whatever till she heard from me by letter."

Vic looked half satisfied.

"That is excellent," he confessed—but, persistently, he continued: "Clif, you are in command here?"

"It seems so."

"You can do as you like?"

"In a way, yes," admitted the cadet commander.

"Then write that letter."

"I intend to."

"Without delay. Don't trust to the slow mails—send it by a messenger."

Clif looked impressed.

"Myself," added Vic, only too willingly offering his services. "I am uneasy, Clif. Telegrams are all well enough, but a brief one only startles and rattles. Miss Stuart is entitled to a clearer comprehension of her peril. Don't trust to hot-and-miss—send me, to make sure."

Clif reflected deeply. There was considerable force and sense to Vic's suggestion. Clif only hesitated for fear he might be overstepping official bonds in pursuing a purely personal duty.

"I have the right," he said at last.

"Of course you have!" encouraged a chorus of three.

"I shall detail you on the duty," said Clif, officially.

"Good for you!" burst out Vic, unofficially—and then came up prim as a pipe stem and made the salute without cracking a wrinkle.

Clif sat down at once to indite the letter. He tried not to frighten Bessie, but he outlined affairs just as they had developed.

"If you meet Hannibal on the road," said Clif, as he completed and tendered the missive to its messenger, hurry him up."

"He may have a reply to your telegram?"

"Then open and read it."

"Yes, it may have a certain guidance."

The two horses that had made the last trip from the academy had been retained in camp.

Hannibal had taken one to make the journey to the telegraph station. Vic decided to use the other to carry him to the nearest railroad town connecting with Annapolis.

It was about 2 o'clock when Vic got started. Just before he was bidding Clif and his friends adieu, Chawncey De Lawncey came bustling in.

Clif had kept out of Chawncey's way as far as possible that day.

He felt aggrieved at the malignant cadet, and feared upon provocation his temper might get the better of him for there was something challenging and offensive to Chawncey's strut and look.

"I say, there, Rollins!" he sang out. "I hear you are going to Annapolis?"

"Go!" spoke Clif in a quick whisper to Vic, to avoid explanations.

"Hold on!" cried Chawncey, as the horse started up. "I want to send a message, lady friend, Rollins, Miss Stuart you know? Pshaw, he's gone."

Ridgely was on one side of Clif, Fishcake on the other. It was well that this was so, for each locking an arm of their friend and superior, they wheeled him about just as one of those arms came near shooting up and out.

"Keep cool, Faraday!" soothed Ridgely. "You know if you had struck him, no matter what the provocation, it would have disgraced your official position forever."

"He knows that, too," declaimed Clif, hotly, "and presumes upon it. This is getting simply intolerable!"

Clif went straight back to quarters tent. Once there he summoned the orderly. Two minutes later Chawncey De Lawncey, looking half-reckless, half-frightened, stood before him.

"Sent for," he announced, making a slovenly salute and trying to be defiant.

"De Lawncey," spoke Clif, stern as a judge, "I have something to say to you that you may think about. You just now mentioned a young lady's name. That young lady, through your recent maneuvers with a so-called

hoodoo man, has possibly been placed in a position of great peril."

Chawncey gave a start that was a jerk.

"What!" he blared.

"The mountebank has simply used you as a dupe to extract information, which, acted upon, may bring him in court as a criminal and you as an accessory. Be careful that you do not too far provoke those who are trying to remedy your mistakes, and save you from disgrace for the honor of the academy."

Chawncey turned white as a sheet.

"Sir! Mr. Faraday! tell me——" he quavered.

"You will report for ordinary duty at six," spoke Clif tranquilly, and Chawncey De Lawncey staggered out of the tent and made for his own as if hot shot were pursuing him.

Clif waited expectantly for Hannibal. He was due long since, and he began to grow anxious.

An hour went by—two of them. Clif had quieted his mind down to duty in grasp and was looking over some official documents, when there was an interruption.

The orderly saluted, and he looked flurried.

"Rollins, sir!" he announced, given permission to speak.

"Rollins!" ejaculated Clif, and lost dignity in an irrepressible upward spring.

Vic was entering, Hannibal behind him, and Hannibal looked agitated.

Vic's face was very serious, and he rather evaded Clif's half-alarmed eyes.

"Vic!" spoke the latter, hurriedly. "Your horse failed you?"

"No."

"You met Hannibal with a reply telegram on the way?"

"Yes."

Vic responded in monosyllables, and half-choked on even these.

"It changes our plans?"

"Materially."

"What does it say?"

"Read for yourself."

Vic extended a folded telegram.

Hastily Clif opened and perused it.

"Too late!" he cried in poignant tones. "Bessie had been lured from home before my wife reached her!"

CHAPTER IX.

BESSIE.

The usually steady hand and voice of the iron-nerved naval cadet shook palpably.

Clif sank back to his chair at the table, and his blanched face and wavering eyes told that dread fear concerning a friend—and that friend a beautiful unprotected girl—had daunted a heart that the swiftest cannon ball could not cause to quail.

The telegram was brief, and bore the signature of the Aunt Tess Herndon, with whom Bessie was stopping in Annapolis.

"Miss Bessie Stuart left home yesterday, personal business taking her away from the city."

"You see your guarded telegram failed to alarm?" submitted Vic.

Clif jumped up suddenly.

"Vic!" he cried stormily, "command or no command, academy or no academy, I am going to Annapolis!"

Vic saw that his friend was unduly wrought up—in the balance against Miss Bessie Stuart's welfare, honors and ambition weighed little with staunch Clif Faraday.

"Don't act on impulse, Clif," advised Vic. "Why Annapolis? Bessie has already left there, the telegram says."

"But there only am I likely to get a trace of how she was lured away."

"If she was?"

"Do not doubt that!" cried Clif. "Her mysterious absence at such a time!—oh, there is no doubt but that the plots of these two villains have been set in operation!"

"Just look over Hannibal for a minute, before you decide on anything, will you?" suggested Vic.

"What do you mean?"

"Yassir, heah I is!" bobbed and grinned the dusky messenger.

"What do you know——" began Clif, and catching sight of something conspicuously pendant to Hannibal's coat button, he supplemented: "What is that?"

"Dat, sah," said Hannibal with grave precision, "am a chawn."

It was a flat stone, big as a pancake, with a hole in one end and a string running through.

"A lucky stone, sah," pursued Hannibal. "and I'se safe now!"

"If you ever were otherwise!" impatiently commented Clif, in no mood for apparent trifles.

"I was, sah," insisted Hannibal, "night afore last."

"Don't take up my time with any further nonsense about that hoodoo!" directed Clif sharply.

"But I sawed him ag'in!"

"What is that?" pressed Clif.

"Yassir!"

"When?"

"Dis mawning."

Clif exchanged a quick, hopeful look with Vic.

"Hereabouts?" he pressed.

"Two mile down de road, sah," declared Hannibal. "He sawed me, and he began turning a menagerie crank."

"A what!"

"An imaginary crank, he means," explained Vic.

"Das it, das it! I flewed. I found de stone—den I knowed I was safe. But I sawed him—de yaller man de wahm dawg hoodoo, de bogey!"

Clif excitedly drew Vic to one side.

"You think there is no doubt of what Hannibal says?" he questioned urgently.

"He is very positive."

"Then at least one of the conspirators is still in this vicinity?"

"It looks so, and from what you overheard the two say, the other should be also in hiding somewhere about."

"But—Bessie?"

"Clif," said Vic seriously, "why may it not be possible that they have lured Bessie down here by letter?"

Clif gave a great start.

"That she may be only now on her way, to fall into some plausible trap they have set for her?"

"Then—I know what to do!" completed Clif, making a dash for his weapons.

A new forcible idea had struck Clif—Vic discerned this

"See here, Clif, don't be rash," he began.

"No, but I dare not delay. A thought has come to me—I must explore instant. Take charge of affairs here till I return."

"But Ridgely—Fishcake?"

"I will see them."

Clif equipped himself hastily, left the tent, hurried to one where he knew his two friends to be.

They were hastily apprised of what had transpired. Of his own exact intentions, however, Clif did not say a word. He simply directed them to make one more active scout of the vicinity.

Clif once free of the camp, broke into a keen run.

"I have got my start in view," he soliloquized—"Hopton."

Clif covered three miles in an incredibly brief space of time. Breathless, he entered the half-store, half-post office, which was the stage office of the village as well.

"All passengers arriving at Wellsville by rail come by coach—thus far, I believe?" he inquired of the single occupant of the place, an old woman.

"Unless they walk."

"And the next stage?"

"To-morrow morning."

"Plenty of time, then, if I am on the right trail!" murmured Clif. "Ah! and the last one to-day?"

"An hour ago."

"Any passengers?"

"Two—our new minister, and a young lady."

If the woman had transfixed Clif with a spear he could not have paused more quickly on his way to the door.

"A young lady?" he repeated, trying to seem calm.

"Yes, sir."

"Stranger?"

"I never saw her before. She inquired for the cadet camp, and the roads hereabouts."

"Will you describe her?"

Clif's eyes snapped at the end of every explaining sentence that followed.

"Bessie!" he murmured convincingly to himself, and aloud: "An hour ago it was, when she arrived?"

"Lacking ten minutes," answered the woman, consulting a clock behind her.

"Did she inquire particularly about any one road?"

"She did."

"Which one?"

"That runs along the river—she went in that direction."

The woman came to the door and pointed.

Clif bolted through the door, following her indication without wasting further time or words.

Bessie was started on her unconscious way leading into the power of unknown enemies.

Clif could not figure out what shrewd plot the schemers had devised to induce her to come to this lonely place.

One thing—Bessie was thoroughly fearless; another she would do as much for Clif, her old Cuban war companion, as he would for her.

She knew that the cadet camp was in this locality, and from this Clif reasoned that she had been influenced by some misrepresentation concerning himself.

Clif ran a mile without stopping—neither Bessie nor anyone else did he come across on the uneven, winding road.

He checked his gait, somewhat discouraged. Had Bessie turned off from the main thoroughfare? Had she already met the persons who had lured her hither?

Clif proceeded more slowly—more doubtingly, too.

Then of a sudden he spurred up afresh.

Like a sun bursting in upon a black valley, like a beacon light amid troubled waters, directly ahead he caught the flutter of a dress, the contour of an exquisitely graceful form.

"Bessie!" uttered Clif, and a mountain load lifted from his mind.

Before he could call her she turned out of sight. When she again came in view she had walked out upon a high overhanging rock, and stood at its end, as if resting or waiting.

Her back was to Clif, and he planned a joyous surprise.

The rock was of peculiar formation; it had a history, and he knew of it, but so exciting was the stress of the moment that he thought only of the lovely girl he had found—in time, and therefore saved.

He glided towards the rock, climbed noiselessly upon it, got to his feet.

"Bessie!"

"Why, Clif——"

A cry freighted with sudden alarm ended the sentence of surprise.

For as Bessie came forward to greet her hero-friend that happened which took her breath away.

The rock tilted like an unbalanced teeter.

Clif Faraday slid, slipped, reeled.

Then he went bounding over into the depths of space.

CHAPTER X.

"THE TILTING ROCK."

In wild distraction Clif described a headlong whirl.

Everything was a blur to him—the blue of the sky, the green of the sharp slant, the yellow sands of a river shore beneath.

A scream rang out overhead, but not for him—Bessie was not given to hysterics.

Natural alarm she had involuntarily expressed, but more likely to be followed up by actions looking to his help or rescue, than weakness or lamentation on the part of an intensely practical and plucky girl.

Clif poignantly traced the cause of the cry—the enemy had appeared on the rock above.

He was doubly sure of this, as following it came a sharp, ringing whistle from the vicinity of that tilting rock.

The "tilting rock," or "tipping stone," was a feature of the locality, and had not Clif been so engrossed with a vision of loveliness that dazzled, he would have realized his bearings more wisely.

An immense boulder, its exquisite equilibrium was maintained as if by a pivot.

Bessie had come towards him, and Clif had clambered up at just the wrong juncture and the most dangerous place.

Clif struck a bush, turned over snatching out, and went rolling again.

A series of small stones met his feet, but began to give—he looked down, ran, tripped, slid, coming flat on a level sandy reach.

"Cadet!" greeted his scurried senses.

"Just in time—it's him, Faraday!" followed in accents of rare excitement.

Clif scanned the speaker, sprang from beside a little skiff.

He instantly recognized him—the blacked-up man of the hoodoo hovel. The fellow was making for him. Clif gave a roll to evade. His hand came up, as he reversed, holding a revolver.

"What is this?" he uttered, and Clif might well question.

He had found the strength to grasp the weapon, but now, suddenly, as he straightened out his arm, a sharp twinge stiffened it.

From elbow to finger tips a sudden palsy made every sinew nerveless.

His elbow must have struck a stone, deadening the entire nerve structure of the member temporarily.

"That I'll take!" and the man snatched up the pistol "You, as you happen in my way, also."

"You won't!" retorted Clif.

He slipped the man's grasp and made a spring—it was to land in the boat with a crash.

The odds were against him, his weapon gone, one arm uselessly crippled.

In a race he would be no match for the merest novice. Clif aimed to get clear of the villain's clutches till he could recuperate and made it.

After a desperate struggle, however, as the boat went sliding out into the water, forced like an arrow by the pressure of Clif's vigorous dive, the man sought to hinder his escaping prey.

He made a grab and fell, going slap into the water, but he accomplished half his purpose.

His hands struck the two light oars at the bow, tipped them, and they went tearing away with the current.

Towards its forceful central sweep Clif was now borne in a dizzying whirl, the boat almost tipping.

He saw his position at once—he was free of his pursuer, but unable to guide his crazily cavorting craft.

If spilled out, expert swimmer as he was, he might not be able—owing to his helpless arm—to breast the fierce current and get ashore.

His would-be captor got up, snarling and enraged. He pointed the pistol at Clif.

"Come back!" he shouted.

"Will you kindly tell me how?" demanded Clif, righting himself to a sitting position.

The villain seemed to see the sense of this. He looked baffled, perturbed.

He drew out a whistle, and facing the tilting rock blew an echoing signal call.

A response farther distant than the rock sounded in a jerky, telegraphic way.

The blacked-up man seemed to have received some reassuring intelligence.

Clif's heart sank. Quick to arrive at conclusions, he believed that the hoodoo had secured Bessie, was bearing her away to captivity.

At all events, his enemy in view now seemed bound to keep him in sight, in the hopes of discovering some way of recapturing him.

The naval cadet found himself in a conspicuously unpleasant predicament.

He was a mile above the bridge, and he knew that nearer to it, after traversing a rock-haunted channel, the stream rolled onward with the fury of a torrent.

Even now the skiff whipped around frightfully—an oar to guide it, a sail, and he might have managed, single-handed though he was.

Those were not at call, but the next best thing was, and after a peculiarly menacing wrench of the boat, Clif leaned over and scanned an object lying in its bottom.

"An umbrella!" he ejaculated.

Clif "had ideas" the minute he espied it. Without difficulty he got it across his knees and open.

Then holding it towards the bow—for the wind set straight ahead—he cast a grim glance ashore.

Down the bank the blacked-up man was running to keep up with Clif.

He set up a shout of dubious expression as he witnessed the adaptation to sail purposes that the cadet had brought about with the umbrella.

"Clever!" he growled.

Clif was proceeding straight, evenly now.

"But you won't last the storm!" continued the man
"Can't you tack with that contrivance?"

"I couldn't think of it!"

"It would pay you—I don't want to hurt you."

"I doubt that."

"If I did—see, this pistol?"

Clif said nothing, but he fancied the fellow might not fire because afraid of attracting attention.

"I simply want to give you a letter."

"Singular!"

"I will follow you till I can deliver it—take care! take care! take care!"

The man might have been in earnest, and he might have been inclined to reveal considerably more of his intentions, but his shrill cries of alarm announced a catastrophe for Clif, and kept tab on its three stages of rapid development.

Crash!—Clif felt the skiff strike a rock.

Whiz!—as if bodily lifted Clif was shot from his seat and whirled through the air.

Crack!—his head met a tree, a post, some wooden object that he felt but could not see, for the blight of darkness and insensibility instead supervened.

Consciousness came back vaguely, dimly, and Clif took in his position by painful, half-dazed stages.

He found himself upright instead of prostrate, the occupant of a minute island or rock in midstream—the rushing waters almost engulfed it.

A heavy post, used at some time or other to hold a warning lantern, was planted in its middle.

To this Clif was tied, helpless, and his mouth was gagged with a handkerchief.

What had happened?—Clif was puzzled. Then away over on the shore he saw a boat and a form.

It was not the craft that had been dashed against the rock, but the man just leaving it was the owner of that skiff.

Clif guessed that he had found another boat, had rowed over to the rock, had secured him there, and had left him to his fate.

Not a very tragic one, Clif decided, for he must be discovered by some passerby the next morning, if not before.

"Why did he take all this trouble?" soliloquized Clif in a puzzled way. "It looks as if he simply wishes to hold me off the trail for a few hours. Ah! what is that?"

Clif's eyes distended as their glance fell to his feet.

There lying on the ground was an envelope, face down, with a conspicuous red seal closing its rear flap.

Thrust through it deep into the soil, to hold it from washing away or blowing away, was Clif's sword.

The grim mystery of the presentation was unique.

The blacked up man calculated on keeping Clif quiescent till he got a good start into hiding.

He had left his dictum, his proposition, behind him in the shape of that well-secured letter.

And when he came to open it—if he ever did—the naval cadet felt sure that he would learn the motive of Bessie Stuart's abduction.

CHAPTER XI.

A SLIDE FOR SAFETY.

"Now the letter!"

"What letter?"

"Under my sword."

"Why, this is like a play!"

Clif Faraday spoke first, just released from his uncomfortable position of captivity.

Ridgely steadied him while Clif stretched his cramped limbs.

Rescue had come to Clif. He had got his gag displaced and his voice did him best service.

At the termination of ten minutes' shouting there was a hail from shore.

Ridgely and a boat soon came dashing across the dangerous current, and now Clif was free.

"Arm all right again," observed Clif. "My sword—thanks. The letter—best of all!"

The boat was soon beached. It was the one that had borne the blacked-up man last away.

A signal halloo greeted almost the instant they got ashore.

"That's Fisheake," declared Ridgely, gave a foot, and the lank plebe loomed up a second later.

"Hello!" he ejaculated with a stare at the adventure-marked cadet.

Clif briefly explained, as he had done to Ridgely. Then he quite eagerly opened the letter.

It was unaddressed, but there were two whole pages of writing inside.

"Well?" propounded Ridgely, curiously watching the vivid play of emotion on Clif's expressive face.

"Well!" answered Clif.

"It's a staggerer?" insinuated Fishcake.

"Rather! I see things clear, now."

"Suppose you enlighten us?"

"Very well. This letter is from the blacked-up man I told you about, and his name is Raycross."

"Raycross! Raycross!" repeated Ridgely, wrinkling his brows. "Ah! I remember! He is the man you unmasked at the town nearby here who tried to kill his two wards?"

"Yes, Royce and Grace——"

Fishcake fluttered at this—it was because of his interest in the little lady last named that Clif had taken a hand in the affair.

"You saved them from his clutches, exposed him," proceeded Ridgely, "but he managed to escape."

"Leaving his accomplice in jail."

"And what is his play now?" questioned Ridgely.

"A strange one, but it shows the knave complete. It seems that he presumes on the gratitude of Royce towards me to bring about a compromise."

"How?"

"He knows that I think a great deal of Bessie Stuart. He planned to capture her, as he has. Through her he threatens me. Through me he hopes to reach Royce. He knows that Royce would do anything for me, and in this letter he makes a proposition."

"What?"

"He declares he will never allow Bessie Stuart to return again to her friends, unless I induce Royce to secure the release of his accomplice, withdraw his charge against himself, and pay them five thousand dollars apiece."

"The scoundrels!"

"Will he make it?" questioned Fishcake in his quaint matter-of-fact way.

"Never!" pronounced Clif with vim.

"Then you say——"

"On to the rescue of Bessie Stuart!"

That was the vivid watchery of the moment, and magically all three sprang to its promptings.

Clif knew the direction in which Raycross had gone—up shore.

His hope was that Raycross, presuming him to be safely silenced and bound for an all-night siege, would proceed leisurely.

Clif guessed aright. They had progressed about a mile, when, slightly in advance of his companions, Clif gave a start and then a leap.

A rocky pathway led up the edge of an eminence, and there, posted, was a man.

"The hoodoo!" cried Clif, and sprang upon him.

With a startled cry the wiry fellow slipped his grasp, and shouted for assistance.

A new utterance following on the echo, Clif ran up the path.

For from up there somewhere his tones seemed to have met the ear of an acquaintance.

"Bessie!"

Clif had been glad at a sight of the charming girl at the tilting rock—he was gladder now.

Bessie sat at the mouth of an excavation in the side of the hill, her hands tied behind her, and her way to freedom blocked by grim walls of stone, unless she sprang to the river or attempted to pass the hoodoo sentinel.

The excavation seemed to indicate a deposit of some valuable sand, used in making colors.

A wire cable spanned the river, with a large basket attached right at hand—used, Clif fancied, to carry the sand over to where transporting barges were accessible on a lower level.

Bessie's bright eyes sparkled with the fervor of admiration of another worthy exploit on the part of her hero, as Clif cut free her bonds.

"Hurry with me, Bessie! Two of the cadets——"

Clif paused there. An uproar proceeded from the path he had first ascended.

Clif took one look.

"Blocked!" he announced tersely to his companion.

"What do you mean, Clif?"

"Those fellows are coming, and they have friends!"

"Yes, some men who are to provide a horse and wagon to take me away."

"Get in!"

Clif counted the chances. Three stalwart fellows, armed with farm implements, were dashing up the path.

Clif hurried Bessie to the basket. He examined the cable, the sustaining gearing.

"Clif, you, too, will come——"

"Do as I say, Bessie!"

"There he is!" shouted the hoodoo's voice.

"The girl——" cried Raycross.

"Is safe!" retorted Clif. "You miserable scoundrels—five to one—come on!"

Zip!

With supreme confidence in the champion who had never yet failed her, Bessie went speeding for the other shore.

Whiz!

Clif's sword came circling into action—the three bumpkins rushed on their fate.

One had a hatchet. Clif took him first—an easy cut, and it was dropped with a howl.

The second, armed with a pitchfork, made a savage jab at Clif.

He did not guess the nimble dodger he had to deal with. Clif glided aside, gave the miscreant a sounding whack with his fist, and sent him sprawling, his weapon whanging over into the river.

The fellow grabbed Clif's sword, up on his feet in an instant, pulling Clif to a stumble—the next minute it fell between them, and both grappled.

He was big, burly, a born wrestler, but Clif was his match.

Once he forced Clif so near to the edge of the rock that a slight cry of terror came floating across the river.

It nerved Clif to his mightiest. He began threshing tactics, whirling his opponent, hacking, pulling—one final feint at falling, and the fellow shot over Clif's shoulders and fell like a log.

Clif turned his attention to his last enemy, who was armed with a club. He was saved all trouble. A spry

form suddenly shot up behind the fellow—Ridgely—and knocked him flat.

"There were two others?" insinuated Clif.

"Fishcake is sitting on one below there, holding the other at bay with a pistol."

"Secure them both—they are the prize of this outfit," directed Clif.

One of the bumpkin crowd had got enough of it and had escaped by some mysterious course—a second lay insensible, the third, half-scared to death, sat staring at the animated sword-wielder and wrestler.

"They told us you was robbers," he mumbled.

"Mistake! They are the robbers," answered Clif, "and will soon be where all robbers eventually get—in jail. Bessie!"

"Coming, Clif!"

The plucky girl was coming—pulling herself and the basket back to its starting point.

The two baffled conspirators were driven at the end of a stout rope in advance of Ridgely and Fishcake.

Despite his severe adventures of the evening, Clif enjoyed the twilight promenade with Bessie in all its pastoral gentleness and beauty.

Bessie explained how a letter, speciously setting out that he (Clif) was in trouble, and could be helped only by her coming secretly to the neighborhood of the camp to meet "other friends," had completely deceived her.

She had believed that Vic or Nanny, or some other of Clif's warm adherents, had sent the letter—not wishing to manifest themselves till she should appear.

When the two conspirators were landed in the village jail, Clif and the others proceeded at once to the home of their former victims—the Raycross wards.

There was another explanation, and pretty Grace soon made Bessie sure that her brief stay would be a welcome one.

It was not destined to be brief, however.

The grateful Royce and Grace wanted to do something for the friends of the unselfish cadet, as he himself would take no recompense for his efforts in their behalf.

Bessie remained as a guest, and sent an invitation speeding to Annapolis for Tess Herndon and her aunt,

the next day, asking them to make their home with these new friends for the duration of the naval encampment.

Chawncey De Lawncey asked to be sent back to the academy on sick roll the next morning.

"You have made him feel pretty sick, for a fact, Clif!" said Vic.

"Some chance of rational, jolly times with him gone!" declared Fishcake.

"And those three girls near at hand to make us want to look our prettiest and at our handsomest!" smiled Ridgely.

"I suppose they will favor us with a daily visit?" suggested Vic, hopefully.

"You bet!" declared little Nanny, with emphasis: "particularly while Faraday is in command!"

(THE END.)

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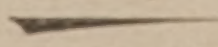
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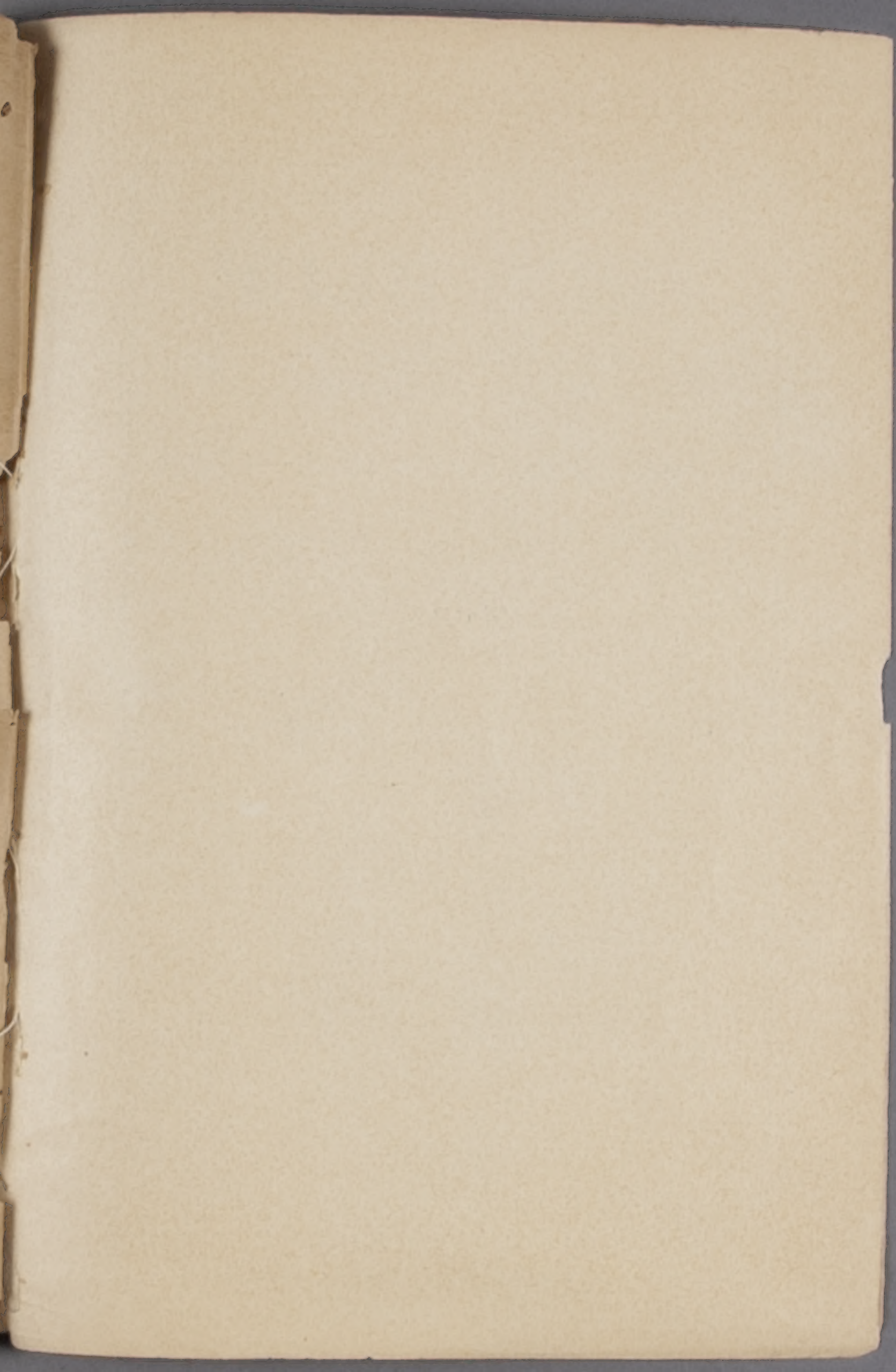
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